

TOLSON'S CHAPEL
111 East High Street
Sharpsburg
Washington County
Maryland

HABS No. MD-1202

PHOTOGRAPHS

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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1849 C St. NW
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TOLSON'S CHAPEL

HABS No. MD-1202

Location: 111 East High Street, Sharpsburg, Washington County, Maryland

Significance: Tolson's Chapel served as a church and a Freedman's Bureau school for black residents of Sharpsburg in the years following the American Civil War. Establishing religious and educational institutions was essential to the future of Sharpsburg's African American community of former slaves and freedmen. Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, just days after the bloody Battle of Antietam was fought in Sharpsburg. The State of Maryland abolished slavery in 1864. Built in 1866, Tolson's Chapel stands as a vivid symbol of the impact on enslaved African Americans of the events surrounding the Battle of Antietam and the Union victory in the Civil War.

Description: This one-story, single pen log structure rests upon a coursed-rubble limestone foundation. There is a sandstone block at the southwest corner inscribed with the words "Tolson's Chapel." The walls of horizontal squared logs are sheathed with vertical board and batten siding and then red asphalt shingles. An exterior brick chimney is located in the middle of the east elevation. The wood door at the center of the south elevation is divided into four solid panels and has a transom above. The six over six wood sash windows have simple flat wood moldings and exterior shutters. The front gable roof is covered with corrugated metal. There is evidence of a small belfry at the front of the gable ridge which is no longer extant. A small shed-roof ell at the rear elevation corresponds to a niche at the back of altar.

The one-room interior has a wood balcony at the rear of the sanctuary accessed via a partially enclosed winder stair at the southwest corner. The balcony has a few wood pews and is supported by two square wood columns. A metal tie rod connects the top of the east and west walls at the middle of the room. On the main floor rows of simple wood pews line the center aisle. The wood floor is partially covered with carpet. The walls are plaster on lath with a bead board wainscot, stained dark brown, on all four walls. The wainscot does not appear in the altar niche and near the winder stair. There is evidence of liquid slate covering on portions of the wall, perhaps for use as a chalkboard for the school. The ceiling slopes to the east and west and is also plaster on wood lath. There is an opening intended for access to the belfry in the ceiling above the balcony. A curved wood altar rail with turned balusters is at the edge of the raised altar platform. A wood pulpit is located at the center of the altar, raised three additional steps above the organ and a pew facing the congregation. The niche at the rear of the altar is framed with a wide wood molding, curved at the top like the ceiling of the niche. An older organ (late 19th century) and another pew sit perpendicular to the rest of the pews in the northeast corner just outside the altar rail. A heating stove is located on the east side of the room and is linked to the

exterior chimney with a pipe. Metal lamp holders are attached to the balcony columns. Their ornate decoration indicates they are from the late nineteenth century. Two early-twentieth-century pendant lights with electric bulbs and round metal shades hang from the ceiling.

The chapel sits at the south edge of a long rectangular lot that slopes down to the north. This churchyard has been used for burials since the late nineteenth century and is scattered with generally plain stone monuments.

History: Tolson's Chapel was built in 1866 by African American residents of Sharpsburg and named for its first minister, John R. Tolson. Samuel Craig and his wife, a local African American couple, donated the land for the church. The *Boonsboro Odd Fellow* reported on November 29, 1866: "The African Church, of which the Corner Stone was laid a few weeks ago, is framed, and will be ready for worship about the holidays." The church was dedicated in October 1867. In 1882 the congregation had about thirty-five members. In April 1868 a white teacher named Ezra Johnson began teaching classes in the Chapel, establishing a Freedmen's Bureau school he called "American Union." The school, funded by the local African American community, offered day classes for children, night classes for adults, and a Sabbath school. The teacher was paid \$6.50 a month. It was one of six Freedman's Bureau schools known to have operated in Washington County between 1866 and 1870.

Captain J. C. Brubaker of the Freedmen's Bureau visited Sharpsburg in January and again in March of 1868 to hold meetings about the possibility of opening a school in the town. In a letter dated March 28, 1868 from Brubaker to John Kimball, Superintendent of Education for the Freedmen's Bureau in Washington, D.C. and Maryland, Brubaker reported that he had made arrangements for the teacher for the school in Sharpsburg. "The colored people," he wrote, "are very anxious to have the school opened and from the spirit manifested I am assured that they will fulfill their part of the contract. I did not have time to arrange for his board but do not think there will be any difficulty."¹ Johnson traveled from Washington to Sharpsburg three days later. The response among the African American community was enthusiastic, with Johnson's first report that same month listing eighteen students in the regular classes and twenty-five in the Sabbath school. The white community was less welcoming to Johnson and in some cases hostile to idea of a Freedman's Bureau school. Johnson informed Kimball soon after he arrived:

¹Letter, Capt. J.C. Brubaker to Kimball, Supt. of Education, (28 March 1868), Microfilm M1056, Roll 5, National Archives and Records Administration.

Arrived here safe and sound, but failed to get board with the white people, notwithstanding their having promised the coloured people to give it at a reasonable price. . . . I am now boarding with one coloured family and lodging with two, until better accommodations can be provided. The fact of the matter is, Mr. Kimble, the citizens would allow a coloured man to teach here, but if possible, they won't allow a white teacher to come here and teach the coloured people; and they have made up their minds to freeze me out with cold shoulders. But I am too well accustomed to a cold shoulder to allow of that.²

Johnson later reported some improvement in public sentiment from unfavorable to indifferent. By July of 1869 another white teacher, John J. Carter, had taken over the school, reporting continued progress by the students. No reports after August 1869 survive for the Sharpsburg Freedmen's school.

More recently, Tolson's Chapel and its adjacent graveyard were transferred from the United Methodist Church to the Save Historic Antietam Foundation (SHAF). SHAF has obtained grants from the Maryland Historical Trust for emergency stabilization and a historic structure report. Eventually, a separate non-profit will be created to oversee the long-term preservation and interpretation of the site.

Sources: Records of the Field Offices, Microfilm M1056 and M1057, Record Group 105 - Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedman, and Abandoned Lands, 1861-1879. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

Scharf, J. Thomas. *History of Western Maryland, Vol II* (originally published 1882), Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1968.

Thomas, J.C. Williams. *A History of Washington County, Maryland, Vol. I.* (originally published 1906) Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1968.

Historians: Dean Herrin and Lisa Davidson, 2004

²Letter, E.A. Johnson to Rev. John Kimball, (6 April 1868), Microfilm M1056, Roll 7, National Archives.